Language Description Assignments

Collecting and organizing facts about language forms part of the everyday work of a practicing linguist. In order to discover the structure of any language, one must first identify those systematic patterns that characterize the language, as well as the puzzles that emerge from them.

Sadly, this task is often neglected in undergraduate linguistics courses, where students are instead presented with a body of data in their assignments and exams, and then asked to analyze those data. At times, this is simply unavoidable, especially when the data come from other, inaccessible languages. Since this course is devoted to the grammar of contemporary English, a language to which we all have ready access, it serves as the ideal venue to practice this sort of descriptive work.

The purpose of these writing assignments, then, is for you to explore the English language as it is spoken and heard, by you and around you, as an object of linguistic investigation. Your goal when completing the assignments will be to identify and carefully document some interesting fact (or set of facts) concerning English grammar.

What makes a linguistic fact "interesting"? Any number of things: perhaps it represents some change that has recently affected the variety of English spoken by a certain group of speakers. Or perhaps it is a feature of some variety of English other than Standard American English, such as a regional, ethnic, or age-based dialect. Or perhaps it is something that was briefly mentioned in one of your classes, which you'd like to investigate further. Or perhaps it is not explained by, or even directly contradicts, what you have already heard about the structure of English. Or perhaps it is just something that, upon closer inspection, makes you say "I never noticed that before…neat!" Indeed, part of the motivation for these assignments is to show you just how many "neat" facts about English are out there, waiting to be discovered and described.

You will be responsible for completing two such descriptions over the first ten weeks of the semester. These should be relatively short, around one or two single-spaced pages. The first must be submitted by **Thursday, February 23**, while the second must be submitted by **Thursday, March 29**. (Note the postponement of the first due date from what was originally listed in the printed syllabus.) Either of these may serve as the foundation for your final paper/presentation.

Some other comments and suggestions:

1. The facts that you describe can come from anywhere: conversations, eavesdroppings, television shows, movies, songs, published materials, the internet, interviews with English speakers, etc. Whatever your source is, be sure to **explicitly cite it**. For instance, if you find your examples in a newspaper, give the name of the paper, date of publication, and article and page number of the example. If you find your examples online, give the URL.

2. As suggested above, you may describe some fact(s) about Standard American English, but you are welcome, and in fact encouraged, to explore other varieties of English that you have access to, e.g., a regional variety spoken in your hometown, or the variety that you use with your classmates and friends (as opposed to the variety that you use with me, or the variety that I use with my friends…) If you choose to do this, make sure to state clearly how the fact(s) constitute a linguistic difference between your chosen variety and Standard American English.

3. Although our class has so far only covered (a portion of) English phonology, you should feel free to explore any aspect of English grammar—phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics.

4. Wherever possible, try to generalize beyond a single example sound, syllable, word, phrase or sentence. For instance, if you notice that some of your friends pronounce two words identically, while others pronounce them differently, try to identify other words pairs that illustrate this same difference. (Remember that linguists look for patterns, not isolated occurrences.) Are there word pairs where you might expect to find this difference between your two groups of friends, but in fact don't?

5. Google is a very effective tool for exploring current trends in the English language. If you are trying to figure out whether people "really say that", some simple Google searches can often provide an initial answer. Remember, though, that not everyone who uses the interwebz has a perfect grasp of the English language, so be sure to click through to the actual webpage and verify that your example comes from a competent English speaker.

6. You are welcome to do additional reading, but you are certainly not required to. Nor do you need to worry about whether the facts that you identify are truly "novel". It's perfectly okay if you stumble upon something that's already known—the purpose of these assignments is for <u>you</u> to discover something for <u>yourself</u>.

7. Have fun with this! Few experiences are more satisfying (for a linguist, at least), than learning something new about one's own native language. This is your chance to systematically explore any feature of English that you've ever found to be odd, beautiful, or oddly beautiful. I've kept the page requirements for these assignments relatively short, so that you can focus on exploring the language, rather than writing about exploring the language.